

Sisters

By
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SYNOPSIS:

CHAPTER I.—With his two daughters, Alix and Cherry, the latter just eighteen years old, and his niece, Anne, Doctor Strickland, retired, is living at Mill Valley, a short distance from San Francisco. His closest friend is Peter Joyce, something of a recluse. Visiting in the vicinity, Martin Lloyd, mining engineer, falls in love with and secretly becomes engaged to Cherry.

CHAPTER II.—While the family is speculating as to Lloyd's intentions, Cherry begs him to support practically answering her engagement to him.

CHAPTER III.—Doctor Strickland feels Cherry is too young to marry and urges her to wait at least a year, but the girl coaxes him into agreeing to an immediate wedding and the ceremony takes place, the couple leaving at once for El Nido, where Martin is employed.

CHAPTER IV.—The honeymoon days over, Cherry begins to feel a vague dissatisfaction with Martin and the monotony of her daily life.

CHAPTER V.—At Mill Valley, Justin Little, lawyer, becomes engaged to Anne, the wedding being set for September, some months distant. Alix visits Cherry at El Nido and the two girls coax Martin into allowing Cherry to go home for Anne's wedding.

CHAPTER VI.—In her father's house Cherry contrasts the peaceful, happy life there with her rather sordid existence at El Nido and realizes that her marriage has been something of a failure. Doctor Strickland, feeling that Cherry is not being fair to Martin, in that she is unduly prolonging her visit after Anne's wedding, urges her to return to her husband. She makes preparations for her departure.

CHAPTER VII.—Peter Joyce tells Cherry he has had one "mad passion" in his life, but the woman was not for him. He does not reveal her name. Cherry rejoins her husband.

CHAPTER VIII.—The young wife's dissatisfaction increases and there is an almost open break. Martin has a brief spell of sickness and something of her old feeling for him returns to Cherry.

CHAPTER IX.—Doctor Strickland is stricken suddenly with what all persons is a fatal illness. Alix summons Cherry to her father's deathbed. After the doctor's death it is discovered that years ago he had borrowed money from Anne's father and seemingly the debt was never discharged. With accumulated interest the amount practically consumes all the money the doctor left. Justin Little makes it manifest that he will insist on the wife's claims. It means that the two girls are left with practically nothing.

CHAPTER X.—Peter Joyce, who has been on a trip practically around the world, returns, not having learned of the doctor's death. He hears of Anne's position with regard to the money with deep disgust. Alix has the money and is making a fair living singing. Joyce urges her to marry him. She consents and they have a simple wedding and go to Joyce's home to live.

CHAPTER XI.—Martin and Cherry leave El Nido and go to Red Creek, a change somewhat for the better, but Cherry retains the old feeling of dissatisfaction. She visits Peter and Alix, and while there comes to a realization that she loves Peter. Though she has never known it, Cherry is the woman whom Peter had in mind when he told her of his "mad passion." He has never ceased to love her and the situation now becomes tragic.

CHAPTER XII.—Peter confesses his love to Cherry, and she admits a like feeling for him. A situation bordering on hidden guilt is created. In the doctor's Bible Alix finds a receipt for the money he had borrowed. Anne's claim falls to the ground and Alix and Cherry are financially independent. Heartbroken over their tragic position, Peter and Alix seek a solution which shall make for the mutual happiness of Cherry and himself, but there seems no way.

CHAPTER XIII.—Mrs. North, Martin Lloyd's aunt, has her suspicions concerning Peter and Cherry and the lovers feel the danger of the situation.

CHAPTER XIV.—Joyce urges Cherry to leave Martin and go away with him to some remote part of the world where they can live their lives together. She finally consents, feeling that Alix will forgive, and Peter makes arrangements for their journey.

CHAPTER XV.

Swept along by a passionate excitement that seemed actually to consume her, Cherry lived through the next three days. Alix noticed her mood, and asked her more than once what caused it. Cherry would press a hot cheek to hers, smile with eyes full of pain, and flutter away. She was well, she was quite all right, only she—she was afraid Martin would summon her soon—and she didn't want to go to him!

Suspecting something gravely amiss, Alix tried to win her confidence regarding Martin. But briefly, quickly, and with a sort of affectionate and apologetic impatience, Cherry refused to discuss him.

"I shall not go back to him!" she said, breathing hard, and with the air of being more absorbed in what she was doing than what she was saying.

"But do you mean that you are really going to leave him?" the older sister questioned.

"I don't know what I'm going to do!" Cherry half sobbed.

"But, dearest—dearest, you're only twenty-four; don't you think you might feel better about it as time goes on?" Alix urged. "Now that the money is all yours, Cherry, and you can have this nice home to come to now and then, isn't it different?"

Cherry was looking at her steadily.

"You don't understand, Sis!" she said.

"I understand that you don't love Martin," Alix said, perplexed. "But can't people who don't love each other live together in peace?" she added, with a half smile.

"Not as man and wife!" Cherry answered.

Alix sat back on her heels, in the ungraceful fashion of her girlhood, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Think of the people who are wearing themselves sick over bills, or sick wives, or children to bring up!" she suggested hopefully. "My Lord, if

you have enough money, and food, and are young, and well—"

"Yes, but, Alix," Cherry argued eagerly. "I'm not well when I'm unhappy. My heart is like lead all the time; I can't seem to breathe! People— isn't it possible that people are different about that?" she asked timidly.

"I suppose they are!" Alix conceded thoughtfully. "Anyway, look at all the fusses in history," she added carelessly, "of grande passions, and murders, and elopements, and the fate of nations—resting on just the fact that a man and woman hated each other too much, or loved each other too much! There must be something in it all that I don't understand. But what I do understand," she added, after a moment, when Cherry, choked with emotion, was silent, "is that Dad would die of grief if he knew you were unhappy, that your life was all broken up in disappointment and bitterness!"

"But is that my fault?" Cherry exclaimed, with sudden tears.

Alix, after watching her for a troubled minute, went to her and put her arm about her. "Don't cry, Cherry!" she pleaded sorrowfully.

Cherry, regaining self-control, resumed her work silently, with an occasional, sudden sigh. She had opened the subject with reluctance; now she realized that they had again reached a blank wall.

Three days after their talk in the moonlight garden Peter found chance to speak alone to Cherry.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Quite!" she said, raising blue eyes to his.

"It's tomorrow, then, Cherry!" he said.

"Tomorrow!" He saw the color ebb from her face as she echoed him. This was already late afternoon; perhaps her thoughts raced ahead to tomorrow afternoon at this time when they two would be leaning on the rail of the little steamer, gazing out over the smooth, boundless blue of the Pacific, and alone in the world.

"Tomorrow you will be mine!" he said.

"That's all I think of," she answered. And now the color came up in a splendid wave of flame, and the face that she turned toward his was radiant with proud surrender.

He told her the number of the dock; they discussed trains.

"We sail at eleven," said Peter, "but I shall be there shortly after ten. I'll have the baggage on board, everything ready; you only have to cross the gangplank. You have your baggage check; give it to me."

They were waiting in the car while Alix marketed. Cherry opened her purse and gave him the punched card-board.

"I'll tell Alix that I have a last dentist appointment at half-past ten," she said. "If she goes in with me, we'll go to the very door. But she says she can't come in tomorrow, anyway. I'll write her tonight, and drop the letter on the way to the boat. Tomorrow, then!" was Cherry's only answer. "I'm glad it's so soon."

"Good-by!" said Cherry, leaning over the side of the car to kiss her sister. Alix received the kiss, smiled, and stretched in the sun.

"Heavenly day to waste in the city!" said Alix.

"I know!" Cherry said nervously. She had been so strangely nervous and distracted in manner all morning that Alix had more than once asked her if there was anything wrong. Now she questioned her again.

"You mustn't mind me!" Cherry said with a laugh. "I'm desperately unhappy," she said, her eyes watering.

"I'd do anything in the world to help you, Cherrie!" Alix said sympathetically.

"I know you would, Sis! I believe," Cherry said, trembling, "that there's nothing you wouldn't give me!"

"That's easily said," Alix answered carelessly, "for I don't get fond of things, as you do! My dear, I'd go off with Martin to Mexico in a minute. I mean it! I don't care a whoop where I live, if only people are happy."

"How about Buck?" Cherry said, as the dog leaped to his place on the front seat and licked his mistress' ear.

Alix embraced him lovingly.

"Well—if he wanted to go with you!" she conceded unwillingly. "But he wouldn't!" she added quickly. Cherry, going to the train, gave her an April smile, and as she took her seat and the train drew on its way, it seemed to her suddenly that she might indeed meet Peter, but it would only be to tell him that what they had planned was impossible.

But on the deck of the Sausalito steamer, dreaming in the sunshine of the soft, lazy autumn day, her heart turned sick with longing once more. Alix was forgotten, everything was forgotten except Peter. His voice, his little figure, erect, yet moving with the little limp she knew so well, came to her thoughts. She thought of herself on the other steamer, only an hour from now, safe in his care, Martin forgotten, and all the perplexities and disappointments of the old life forgotten, in the flood of new security and joy. Los Angeles—New Orleans—France—it mattered not where they wandered; they might well love the world, and the world them, from today on.

"So that is to be my life—one of the blamed and ignored women!" Cherry mused, leaning on the rail and watching the plunge of the receding water. "Like the heroines of half the books—only it always seemed so bold and so frightful in books! But to me it just seems the most natural thing in all the world. I love Peter, and he loves me, and the earth

is big enough to hide us, and that's all there is to it. Anyway, right or wrong, I can't help it," she finished, rejecting to find herself suddenly serene and confident.

It was twenty minutes past ten, a warm, sweet morning, with great hurrying back and forth at the ferry, women climbing to the open seats of the cable cars, planning on their violets or roses as they climbed. Cherry sped through it all, beside herself now with excitement and strain, only anxious to have the great hands of the clock drop more speedily from minute to minute, and so round out the terrible hour that joined the old life to the new. She was hurrying blindly toward the dock of the Los Angeles line, absorbed in her one whirling thought, when somebody touched her arm, and a



In Utter Confusion She Looked Up. It Was Martin!

voice, terrifyingly unexpected and yet familiar, addressed her, and a hand was laid on her arm.

In utter confusion she looked up. It was Martin who stopped her.

For a few dreadful seconds a sort of vertigo seized Cherry and she was unable to collect her thoughts or to speak even the most casual words of greeting. She had been so full of her extraordinary errand that she was bewildered and sick at its interruption; her heart thundered, her throat was choked, and her knees shook beneath her. Where was she—what was known—how much had she betrayed—

Gasping, trying to smile, she looked up at him, while the ferry plume whirled about her and pulses drummed in her ears. She had automatically given him her hand; now he kissed her.

"Hello, Cherry; where you going?" for the third time.

"I came into town to shop," she faltered.

"You what?" She had not really been intelligible, and she felt it, with a pang of fright. He must not suspect—the steamer was there, only a short block away; Peter might pass them; a chance word might be fatal—he must not suspect—

"I'm shopping!" she said distinctly, with dry lips. And she managed to smile.

"Well," Martin said, "surprised to see me?"

"Oh, Martin—" said her fluttered voice. Even in the utter panic of heart and soul she knew that, for safety's sake she must find his vanity.

"I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you," he said. "I'm through with the Red Creek people!"

"Martin!" Cherry enunciated almost voicelessly. She looked from a flower vendor to a newsboy, looked at the cars, the people—she must not faint. She must not faint.

"Well—but where are you going? Home?"

"I was going to the dentist a minute, but it's not important." They had turned and were walking across to the ferry. She knew that there was no way in which she might escape him. "What did you say?" she said.

"I asked you when the next boat left for Mill Valley?"

"We can—go—find out." Cherry's thoughts were spinning. She must warn Peter somehow. It was twenty minutes of eleven by the ferry clock. Twenty minutes of eleven. In twenty minutes the boat would sail. She thought desperately of the women's waiting room upstairs; she might plead the necessity of telephoning from it. But it had but one door, and Martin would wait at that door.

Suddenly she realized that her only hope of warning Peter was to send a messenger. But if Martin should chance to connect her neighborhood with the boat, when he met her, and her sending of a message to Peter here—

"I think there's a boat at eleven something," she said, collectively. "Suppose you go and find out!"

She glanced toward the entrance of the Sausalito waiting-room, a hundred yards away, and a mad hope leaped in her heart. If he turned his back on her—

"What are you going to do?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"I ought to telephone Alix!" Her despair lent her wit. If he went to the ticket office, and she into a telephone booth, she might escape him yet! While he dawdled here, minutes were flying, and Peter was watching every car and every passer-by, torn with the same agony that was tearing her. "If you'll go find out the exact time and get tickets," she said, "I'll telephone Alix."

"Tickets?" he echoed, with all Martin's old, maddening slowness. "Haven't you got a return ticket?"

"I have mileage!" she blundered.

"Oh, then I'll use your mileage!" Martin said. "Telephone," he added, nodding toward a row of booths, "no hurry; we've got piles of time!"

She remembered that he liked a masculine assumption of easiness where all trains, tickets, railroad connections, and transit business of any sort were concerned. He liked to loiter elaborately while other people were running, liked to pull out his big watch and assure her that they had all the time in the world. She tried to call a number, left the booth, paid a staring girl, and rejoined him.

"Busy!" she reported.

"I was just thinking," Martin said, "that we might stay in town and go to the Orpheum; how about it? Do we have to have Peter and Alix?"

Cherry flushed, fingered again, in the well-remembered way, under all her fright and stir. Her voice had its old bored note.

"Well, Martin, I've been their guest for two months!"

"I'd just as soon have them!" Martin conceded, indifferently.

But the diverted thought had helped Cherry, irritation had nerved her, and the reminder of Martin's old, trying stupidities had lessened her fear of him.

"I've got to send a telegram—for Alix," she said.

"What about?" he asked, less curious than ill-bred.

"Goodby to some people who are sailing!" Cherry answered, calmly. "Only don't mention it to Alix, because I promised it would go earlier!" she added.

"I saw the office back here," he told her. They went to it together, and he was within five feet of her while she scribbled her note.

"Martin met me. Nothing wrong. We are returning to Mill Valley, C. L." She glanced at her husband; he was standing in the doorway of the little office, smoking. Quickly she addressed the envelope. "Don't read that name out loud," she said, softly but very slowly and distinctly, to the girl at the desk. She put a gold piece down on the note. "Keep the change, and for God's sake get that to the Harvard, sailing from Dock 67, before eleven!" she said.

The girl looked up in surprise; but rose immediately to the occasion. Cherry's beauty, her agonized eyes and voice, were enough to awaken her sense of the dramatic. A sharp rap of the clerk's pencil summoned a boy.

"George, there's a dollar in that for you if you deliver it before eleven to the Harvard!" said she. The boy seized it, stuck it in his hat, and fled.

"And now for the boat!" Cherry said, rejoicing Martin, and speaking in almost her natural voice. They went back to the Sausalito ferry entrance again, and this time telephoned Alix in real earnest, and presently found themselves on the upper deck of the boat, bound for the valley.

Until now, and in occasional rushes of terror still, she had been absorbed in the hideous necessity of deceiving, of covering her own traces, of anticipating and closing possible avenues of betrayal. But now Cherry began to breathe more easily, and to feel rising about her, like a tide, the half-forgotten consciousness of her relationship with this man in the boldly-checked suit who was sitting beside her. She had thought to escape the necessity of telling him that she was not willing to return to him; she had been wrapped in dreams so great and so wonderful that the thought of his anger and resentment had been as nothing to her. But she had that to face now.

She had it to face immediately, too. She knew that every hour of postponement would cost her fresh humiliations and difficulties, and as the boat slipped smoothly past the island that roughly marked the halfway point, she gathered all her forces for the trial. The one distinct impression she had from Martin was the appalling one that he did not dream that she had decided to sever their union completely and finally.

"Well, how's the valley? Bore you to death?" he interrupted the flow of his own topic to ask carelessly.

"Oh, no, Martin!" she quivered. "I—love it there! I always loved it!"

"Alix is a fine girl—she's a nice girl," Martin conceded. "But I can't go Peter! He may be all right, all that lah-di-dah and Omar Khayyam and Browning stuff may be all right, but I don't get it!" And he yawned contentedly in the sunshine.

After a few seconds he gave Cherry an oblique glance, expecting her resentment. But she was thinking too deeply even to have heard him. Her mind was working as desperately as a caged animal, her thoughts circling frantically, trying windows, walls, and doors in the prison in which she found herself, mad for escape.

She blamed herself bitterly now for allowing him, in the surprise and fear she felt, in the shock of their unexpected meeting, to arrange this domestic and apparently reconciled return to the valley house. But it was too late now! Too late for anything but a bald and brave and cruel half-hour that should, at any cost, under them.

Quick upon the thought came another: what should she and Peter plan now! For to suppose that their lives were to be guided back into the old hateful channel by this mere mischance was preposterous. Within a few days their interrupted trip must be resumed, perhaps tomorrow—perhaps this very night they would manage it successfully. Meanwhile, until she could see Peter alone, there was Martin to deal with, Martin who was leaning forward, vaingloriously reciting to her long speeches he had

made to this superior or that.

"Martin," she said, impetuously interrupting him, "I've got to talk to you! I've meant to write it—so many times, I've had it in mind ever since I left Red Creek!"

"Shoot!" Martin said, with his favorite look of indulgent amusement.

"There are marriages that without any fault on either side are a mistake," Cherry began, "any contributory fault, I mean—"

"Talk United States!" Martin growled, smiling, but on guard.

"Well, I think our marriage was one of those!" Cherry said.

"What have you got to kick about?" Martin asked, after a pause.

"I'm not kicking!" Cherry answered, with quick resentment. "But I wish I had words to make you realize how I feel about it!"

Martin looked gloomily up at her, and shrugged.

"This is a sweet welcome from your wife!" he observed. But as she regarded him with troubled and earnest eyes, perhaps her half-forgotten beauty made an unexpected appeal to him, for he turned toward her and eyed her with a large tolerance. "What's the matter, Cherry?" he asked. "It doesn't seem to me that you've got much to kick about. Haven't I always taken pretty good care of you? Didn't I take the house and move the things in; didn't I leave you a whole month, while I ate at that rotten boarding-house, when your father died; haven't I let you have—how long is it?—seven weeks, by George, with your sister?"

Cherry recognized the tones of his old arraigning voice. He felt himself ill-treated.

"Now you come in for this money," he began. But she interrupted him hotly:

"Martin, you know that is not true!"

"Isn't it true that the instant you can take care of yourself you begin to talk about not being happy, and so on?" he asked, without any particular feeling. "You bet you do! Why, I never cared anything about that money, you never heard me speak of it. I always felt that by the time the lawyers and the heirs and the witnesses got through, there wouldn't be much left of it, anyway!"

Too rich in her new position of the woman beloved by Peter to quarrel with Martin in the old unhappy fashion, Cherry laid an appealing hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry to meet you with this sort of thing," she said, simply. "I blame myself now for not writing you just how I've come to feel about it!"

We must make some arrangement for the future—things can't be as they were!"

"You've had it all your way ever since we were married," he began.

"Now you blame me—"

"I don't blame you, Martin!"

"Well, what do you want a divorce for, then?"

"I don't even say anything about a divorce," Cherry said, fighting for

time only. "But I can't go back!" she added, with a sudden force and conviction that reached him at last.

"Why can't you?"

"Because you don't love me, Martin, and—you know it—I don't love you!"

"Well, but you can't expect the way we felt when we got married to last forever," he said, clumsily. "Do you suppose other men and women talk this way when—the novelty has worn off?"

"I don't know how they talk. I only know how I feel!" Cherry said, chilled by the old generalization.

Martin, who had stretched his legs to their length, crossed them at the ankles, and shoved his hands deep in to his pockets, staring at the racing blue water with somber eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked, heavily.

"I want to live my own life!" Cherry answered, after a silence during which her tortured spirit seemed to coin the hackneyed phrase.

"That stuff!" Martin answered, under his breath. "Well, all right, I don't care, get your divorce!" he agreed, carelessly. "But I'll have something to say about that, too," he warned her. "You can drag the whole thing up before the courts if you want to—only remember, if you don't like it much, you did it. If never occurred to me even to think of such a thing! I've done my share in this business; you never asked me for anything I could give you that you didn't get; you've never been tied down to housework like other women; you're not raising

a family of kids—go ahead, tell every shop-girl in San Francisco all about it, in the papers, and see how much sympathy you get!"

"Oh, you beast!" Cherry said, between her teeth, furious tears in her eyes. The water swam in a blur of blue before her as they rose to go downstairs at Sausalito.

Martin glanced at her with impatience. Her tears never failed to anger him.

"Don't cry, for God's sake!" he said, nervously glancing about for possible onlookers. "What do you want me to do? For the Lord's sake don't make a scene until you and I have a chance to talk this over quietly—"

Cherry's thoughts were with Peter. In her soul she felt as if his arm was about her, as if she were pouring out to him the whole troubled story, sure that he would rescue and console her. She had wiped her eyes, and somewhat recovered calm, but she trusted herself only to shrug her shoulder as she preceded Martin to the train.

There was no time for another word, for Alix suddenly took possession of them. She had had time to bring the car all the six miles to Sausalito, and meant to drive them direct to the valley from there.

She greeted Martin affectionately, although even while she did so her eyes went with a quick, worried look to Cherry. They had been quarreling, of course—it was too bad, Alix thought, but her own course was clear. Until she could take her cue from them, she must treat them both with cheerful unconsciousness of the storm.

They reached the valley and Martin was magnanimous about the delayed lunch. Anything would do for him, he said; he was taking a couple of days' holiday, and everything went. Kow was chopping wood after lunch, and he sauntered out to the block with suggestions; Alix, laying a fire for the evening, simply because she liked to do that sort of work, was favored with directions. Finally Martin pushed her aside.

"Here, let me do that," he said. "You'd have a fine fire here, at that rate!"

Later he went down to the old house with them, to spend there an hour that was trying to both women. It was almost in order now; Cherry had pleased her simple fancy in the matter of hangings and papering, and the effect was fresh and good.

"Girls going to rest this?" Martin asked.

"Unless you and Cherry come live here," Alix said boldly. He smiled tolerantly.

"Why should we?"

"Well, why shouldn't you?"

"Loading, eh?"

"No, not loading. But you could transfer your work to San Francisco, couldn't you?"

Martin smiled a deep, wise, long-enduring smile.

"Oh, you'd get me a job, I suppose?" he asked. "I love the way you women try to run things," he added, "but I guess I'll paddle my own canoe for a while longer!"

"There is no earthly reason why you shouldn't live here," Alix said pleasantly.

"There is no earthly reason why we should!" Martin returned. He was annoyed by a suspicion that Alix and Cherry had arranged between them to make this plan the alternative to a divorce. "To tell you the honest truth, I don't like Mill Valley!"

Alix tasted despair. Small hope of preserving this particular relationship. He was, as Cherry had said, "impossible."

"Well, we must try to make you like Mill Valley better!" she said with resolute good-nature. "Of course, it means a lot to Cherry and to me to be near each other!"